

# THE WILD DUCKS OF VENICE

BY

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The city of Venice in Southern California was built around a network of canals that drained into the ocean in imitation of the Italian Venice. No palaces, just ordinary tract homes. Naturally, the canals became a magnet for migrating wild ducks. Families started feeding them, and many of them became pets. Non-migrating domestic geese were introduced as well.

In the 1980s, thousands of ducks and geese in Venice suddenly started dying. Once they got sick they would die in two or three days. The disease was diagnosed as Duck Plague, a disease that only affects ducks and geese.

This was one case that my department, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, didn't get involved in, at least at first. The nearest duck

farms were fifty miles away and weren't involved.

The California Department of Fish and Game attempted to depopulate the wild birds in Venice and sent a small army of game wardens to catch and kill them. They used cannons to shoot nets over the birds to catch and kill them. The Venice homeowners were furious and did everything they could to stop the game wardens. Fish and Game shouldn't have been surprised at the response. They had encountered a similar public uproar when they depopulated wild ducks for Duck Plague in Northern California a month earlier. Very likely the outbreak in Venice had come from escaped birds from Northern California.

But the outbreak in Northern California had been in public parks,

and no one could stop Fish and Game. In Venice the homeowners opened their gates to the ducks and geese and refused entry to the wardens. Fish and Game got search warrants, but by then the birds had been spirited away.

A month passed and the disease outbreak was over. All the remaining birds were healthy. The virus in the canal water was gone. The homeowners petitioned Fish and Game to allow their birds back on the canals. But Fish and Game insisted that the remaining birds were potential carriers of the virus and continued insisting that they be depopulated to protect other migrating ducks.

A private veterinarian offered to test the birds to prove they didn't have the virus, but Fish and Game said they would only accept test results from a state veterinarian. Any unofficial test could be from chickens for all they knew. I was the closest state veterinarian to the secret location in Ridgecrest and was asked to go take blood samples and swabs. Ridgecrest is in the Mojave Desert, hundreds of miles from the nearest wild ducks. This would have been an ideal place to quarantine the birds. The place was a horse stable with 300 geese.

Geese? I thought it was ducks. Oh well.

I brought along a crew to help with catching, holding, and wing banding. The wing bands were for individual ID in case we found some positives.

I was asked to keep the location a secret, but a secret from whom? Shortly after I arrived a helicopter landed with a news crew from a Los Angeles TV station. They followed my every movement with their cameras. So much for secrecy.

After we spent the morning taking blood samples and swabs, the owner of the stable served a spaghetti lunch in her home. Over lunch the news anchorman peppered me with questions off camera. I tried to explain that I wasn't with Fish and Game and had nothing to do with the decision to depopulate. I did say that healthy birds can sometimes be carriers and spread the disease. He asked me if I would be willing to speak on camera. I hesitated, but he assured me it would be just the same as what we had already talked about. What a mistake! As soon as I got in front of the camera, he hit me with, "Why are you trying to kill these poor defenseless birds?"

"I'm not trying to kill anything!"

"I suppose you didn't chase these birds out of Venice."

"That's right."

He had his teeth in me and wouldn't let go, so I walked away from the camera saying, "This isn't what we agreed to talk about."

I don't get L.A. TV in Bakersfield, but my friends told me I was included on the news. They didn't say whether it was favorable or not.

Thirty percent of the geese tested positive, and the virus was isolated. These birds were indeed carriers, Typhoid Marys.

The University of California at Davis offered to take the birds for a study. Duck Plague wasn't commonly available to study, and no one knew how long the virus would persist in carriers. Outbreaks of Duck Plague on the Mississippi River had run the course and disappeared without any depopulation efforts, so the possibility existed that the carrier state was just temporary.

But before anything could be done, Fish and Game obtained a search warrant, took the geese, and killed them all.

Rumor had it that the ducks were hidden at two other locations,

but after the events at Ridgecrest, nobody was talking. In the spring, wild ducks returned to Venice on their usual migration. Were the captive ducks returned as well? The public, and Fish and Game, will never know.